

**WASHINGTON**  
**James Reston**

# What Reagan Lost

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You can always tell that a politician or an actor is getting into trouble when the people stop laughing at his jokes or begin to clap at the wrong places.

That's what happened to President Reagan on the Nicaragua question. What he lost in the House of Representatives was not another \$100 million for the contras. He can probably pick that up, 50 cents to the dollar, in the Senate, and with Casey at the bat in the C.I.A., maybe get it all back, one way or another.

What he lost was a bit of his magic, which has been the source of his strength. Somehow, with a wave and a smile, he managed to get away with a policy of borrow and borrow, spend and spend that doubled the total national debt and more than doubled the annual interest rate on that debt.

But when he made \$100 million for the rebels in Nicaragua a test of his Presidency and the loyalty of the Congress, even his most faithful supporters here began to think he was pushing his television luck too far.

Particularly since after he lost in the House, he began to lose not only his magic but his temper. He would not accept the doubts of the Congress. He would keep after them for that \$100 million for the contras, again and again, until he won.

Meanwhile, in the confusion, some other things are going on in the world. The U.S.-Soviet talks in Geneva on the control of nuclear weapons are not making progress.

The Russians are arguing for an end to nuclear tests, and the United

States is testing nuclear weapons underground in the Nevada desert this weekend.

The war between Iran and Iraq continues with spectacular and unnoticed loss of life; the Israelis and Arabs continue their endless feuds in the Middle East, and even the Israeli Parliament has been breaking down into personal and factional fights on the floor of the Knesset.

So in Washington we go on arguing about Nicaragua, and in Moscow they go on arguing about Afghanistan, and in Europe the governments argue about trade and the cost of vegetables. But somehow nobody seems ever to get around to the things they have in common.

One thing they have in common is that all their ideological theories and systems of politics are failing to deal with the realities of human nature. All you have to do is look around.

If the purpose of a government is to look after the well-being of its people, then surely the Soviet Communist system in Moscow is the greatest disappointment of the century. It is no longer regarded as a model for the Communist parties in the Western industrial world, or in Eastern Europe. And even Mikhail Gorbachev, at the recent party congress in the Kremlin, railed at its failures.

The new leaders in China have had to concede that the theories of Mao Zedong were a disaster, and are now trying to match the philosophy of the central kingdom to the computerized revolution of the industrial West.

François Mitterrand in Paris, Margaret Thatcher in London, Helmut Kohl in West Germany, among others, are all finding that their theories are being destroyed by the brutal facts of life, and that they have to compromise with their political opponents at home and with their allies and adversaries abroad.

Maybe this is the good news today. With the first world economy in history, when the price of oil creates turmoil in the Middle East and the Middle West, and creates new problems even in Texas and Louisiana, politicians here and elsewhere have to think anew about how to work together for the people they represent.

And this is precisely the regret here about President Reagan, who stands at the center of this world struggle. He is not concentrating on the central questions of the age but using all of his considerable power and eloquence on Nicaragua. This is what he has really lost in recent days: not only \$100 million for the contras, but the confidence of the Congress that he knows where he's going, that he has a sense of what is primary and what is secondary.

And if this is true, it is important. For if we've learned anything about the conduct or misconduct of foreign policy, it is that only the President, and not the Congress, can speak effectively for the United States. This President Reagan has not done. And the Democrats haven't been much help either. But the critical point is that Mr. Reagan has three long years to go during which the tangles of military arms and trade depend primarily on him.

He needs the support of the Congress, but by concentrating on Nicaragua and insisting that this is the main question for decision, he is losing support and hurting himself, his party and the nation in the process. □